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THE "CORPORATE" CORRUPTION OF IDENTITY IN TULLIO AVOLEDO'S *LO STATO DELL'UNIONE*

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Ever since emerging as a distinctive literary genre in eighteenth-century France and England the novel has proved to be a vehicle for direct or indirect critical comment upon the state of contemporary society. However, it was only in the *entre deux guerres* period of the first half of the twentieth century, with its huge political and social upheavals, that the novel of "commitment" became established as a sub-genre in its own right.

Responses to Fascism, Communism, Socialism and to the horrors of war, were legion, especially in Europe. One thinks particularly of Orwell and Huxley in Britain, of the Manns in Germany, of Sartre, Camus and Malraux in France, all key figures in this development of novels driven essentially by well-defined political ideologies. In totalitarian societies, such as Nazi Germany or Fascist Italy, only apologists for the regime were allowed a voice and in Italy novels of dissent were few in number; Pratolini, Silone, Vittorini and Moravia were, in the main, oblique critics, focusing on the plight of the industrial or rural working classes in socio-economic rather than political terms.

In the war-free years of the second half of the century the novel in Italy continued centrally to examine the state of society, in the long shadow of the disappointments which stemmed from the post-Second World War settlement, and the various ensuing "compromessi". Political and economic corruption came to be viewed as different facets of the same underlying sickness and a strong vein of social criticism along these lines was opened up by writers such as Sciascia, Calvino and Pasolini. In many of Sciascia's novels, for example, an individual uncovers and then investigates crimes which prove to be directly or indirectly traceable back to the highest echelons of government; furthermore, coming too close to the awful truth of the State riddled with corruption the protagonist is himself finally destroyed by it.

Since the political upheavals of the early 1990s, Italian writers have continually confronted issues of political identity, particularly in view of the fascistic tendencies that are increasingly polluting society. It is in this context that Tullio Avoledo, a writer from Friuli, continues the strong tradition of "impegno".[1] This essay examines his third novel,

[1] For a comprehensive analysis of "impegno" see J. Burns, *Fragments of impegno: Interpretations of commitment in contemporary Italian narrative 1980*-2000, Leeds, Northern Universities Press, 2001.

Lo stato dell'unione (2005),[2] addressing specifically the two closely-linked, destabilizing – for the individual – elements of corruption and conspiracy in the business world.[3]

Much as the Greek tragedians charted the unequal struggle of man against the gods, Tullio Avoledo's novels, all grounded in contemporary reality, tend to focus on the struggle of an individual against a given entity. The "entities" (banks, business corporations, political or religious groups) are corrupt, and the protagonists, while certainly not all highly principled themselves, are typically caught up in systems, and crushed or eliminated. Fantasy and imagination, however, are not lacking: the novels contain repeated reference to sacred texts, ancient gods, prophecies and dreams, as well as to futuristic technologies and experiences.

Avoledo's fiction is further characterized by contemporary idiom, an intense use of metaphor and allusion (both popular and classical), and by irony and humour. His novels incorporate sudden twists in the plot, suspense, bizarre and fantastic episodes, as well as a broad range of stylistic and structural devices. The author also favours a decidedly male viewpoint: although his male characters are generally weak or inadequate, all receive sympathetic treatment – perhaps because of the difficult positions in which they find themselves, their dealings with the globalized economy, the ignorant, the compromised, the terrifying or the unknown. Female characters are portrayed less sympathetically, and tend to occupy positions of power, whether at work or in the home.

Avoledo's first two novels map out what will prove to be the salient characteristics of his work. *L'elenco telefonico di Atlantide* (2003), which grew out of a personal crisis when the small bank for which the author worked was gobbled up by a giant corporation, tells the story of mid-career bank clerk, Giulio Rovedo, whose identity is constantly undermined. Rules and restrictions dominate, especially at "Bancalleanza", and scheming clientelistic advancements or convenient preferences suffocate individual initiative. If Giulio dares to have an idea himself, he is reprimanded brusquely by management: "Questi non sono tempi per l'originalità" [*ETA*, 22].[4] In despair from the start, Giulio remarks to a colleague – and this will give some idea of the flavour of the exchanges rippling through the narrative – "Pensa se Darwin avesse studiato l'evoluzione da noi, invece che alle Galapagos. Anziché 'la sopravvivenza del piú adatto' avrebbe inventato 'la sopravvivenza del piú incapace'" [*ETA*, 12]. Before long, Giulio is caught up in a sinister conspiracy against his bank, one that involves a search for the lost "Arca dell'*Alleanza*" – with its overlapping biblical-banking allusions.[5]

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[2] Details and abbreviations of novels by Avoledo in this essay are as follows:
ETA: *L'elenco telefonico di Atlantide*, Turin, Einaudi, 2003;
MB: *Mare di Bering*, Turin, Einaudi, 2004;
SU: *Lo stato dell'Unione*, Turin, Sironi, 2005.

[3] Avoledo has published eight novels 2003-2009; passing reference will be made to each, where relevant.

[4] Avoledo's fifth novel, *Breve storia di lunghi tradimenti* (2007) revives the banking context, but places the characters in new contexts, less convincingly, in a sort of "parallel" world.

[5] The Ark of the Covenant, housing the two tablets of stone on which the Ten Commandments were written, is Bancalleanza's logo. For further discussion of *L'elenco telefonico*, see my essay *Apocalypse and Dystopia in Contemporary Italian Writing*, in G. Ania and A. Hallamore Caesar, eds, *Trends in Contemporary Italian Narrative 1980-2007*, Newcastle, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. 155-81; and A. Bianchi, *Vivere dopo la morte. Postmoderno e distopia ne L'elenco telefonico di Atlantide di Tullio Avoledo*, "Narrativa", 25, 2003, pp. 187-200.

Mare di Bering (2003), set in a university environment, focuses this time on a younger protagonist, Mika, who runs a thesis-writing service for the inept and/or wealthy. And yet Mika is also involved in anti-government protests – against nuclear weapons, global warming and the 2001 G8 summit in Genoa – all viewed as conspiracies against the oppressed. As in *L'elenco telefonico*, Avoledo repeatedly highlights the tensions prevailing in society (eg., those relating to age, culture, sexuality and race): it is a society in which *Schindler's List* is prohibited and the speeches of Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's minister for propaganda, are successfully reused.[6] Mika is hardly an innocent, but he is also manipulated, blackmailed and (physically) threatened by others. He *is* weak, but is a middleman – for which Avoledo seems to excuse him, perhaps recognizing that most people are in the middle of something, some chain, some structure or system.

Lo stato dell'unione (2005) develops some of these themes, focusing particularly on questions of identity and race.[7] Avoledo returns here to a fifty-year old protagonist, Alberto Mendini, a publicist, who lives in the north east with his wife Marta and their two children.[8] The family is struggling, however, with the collapse of Alberto's business following his "foolish" exposure of a powerful company, "Puritan". As the story opens, we realize that Alberto has been pretending to go to the office for two months, while accumulating only debts. One evening he receives a visit at his home from "l'assessore regionale della cultura", Enrica Martinelli, to discuss a new Project she wants him to lead: he is to plan a grand celebration of regional identity for "l'Anno dell'Identità Celtica" [*SU*, 52]. Martinelli, however, we immediately see, has no culture herself – she mistakes a Matisse for a Mirò, is slow to grasp subtleties and misattributes quotations.[9] In contrast, we see the ordinariness, yet intelligence, of Alberto's family members, especially his wife Marta, trying to finish her thesis for a psychology degree, though also six-year-old Gaia.[10] Marta, indeed, shows animosity (rather than gratitude) towards Martinelli, aware as she is of the councillor's well-known political beliefs, yet she also evidently resents her openly flaunted femininity. Despite moral doubts about working for Martinelli's party, "Italia in Marcia" – or "Italia Marcia", as Alberto prefers to think of it [*SU*, 54] – and knowing nothing of a Celtic presence in his region, the generous salary persuades him; Marta reluctantly accepts this too.

Of course, the commemoration turns out to be nothing but a "front" for racially motivated, segregationist propaganda. Alberto learns that rather than trying to trace their people's Celtic identity it will be more a matter of inventing it – as the "Squadra" he is to lead have been trying (unsuccessfully) to do for months, coining slogans and fabricating documentary evidence and exhibits for an exhibition.

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[6] A bank employee, Pierino Francescutto, has drafted several very successful speeches for his superiors, based on those of Goebbels ("Non ho mai ricevuto tanti complimenti"; *MB*, 369-70). He turns to Mika since Goebbels' original speeches have just been published and he fears exposure.

[7] 2005 also saw the publication of *Tre sono le cose misteriose*, the story of a public prosecutor involved in a high-profile war crimes trial; this novel earned Avoledo the Premio Grinzane Cavour (in 2006).

[8] The region "è posta tra Friuli e Veneto", the (unnamed) town a cross between Pordenone and Treviso; personal communication, 1-4-2009.

[9] Martinelli is endowed with neither intelligence nor wit. The grand speeches she later makes are laced with rhetoric [eg. *SU*, 237-40], and when Alberto relates an unintentionally racist comment he made at his daughter's school (against Albanians), thereby acknowledging his own perhaps unconscious prejudices, she quite misses the point [*SU*, 244].

[10] Avoledo readily acknowledges his debt to his own children for the presence of child characters in his fiction; personal communication, 14-7-2009.

Clearly, Avoledo is not fabricating the history underlying the story; there is indeed some evidence of Celtic peoples having inhabited and passed through the region (as many other regions…). The author is attacking, rather, the political capital made of this fact – Internet sites for "Padania" currently sport an array of claims to its distinctive identity, some pointing to the Celtic origin ("Pad") of the name.[11] The book cover also warns us, "sciascianamente":

> "In una Regione che non c'è, ma potrebbe esserci, in un'Italia governata dal partito Italia in Marcia, nel pieno di un complotto separatista che punta al distacco del NordEst e alla creazione di un nuovo Stato – razzista e fondato sulla 'comune identità celtica' – si svolge questo romanzo".

Increasingly, we find references to racist policies, practices and environments, to ethnic cleansing and civil war, to Auschwitz, Nazism and Teutonic culture, past and present, and to the need to protect the "Regione" from "foreign" elements. Notably, those from outside the region occupy only junior positions on the Council.

When Alberto is introduced to the team assigned to him, he finds that no one actually believes in the Project; all go along with it partly as a result of moral apathy, partly in order to be paid [*SU*, 77-81]. And when they take Alberto to visit their exhibition at the Castle, Alberto observes: "A giudicare dalla mostra, le 'radici del nostro futuro' sono tutt'altro che solide" [*SU*, 91].

Initially, Alberto is a "subversive" – he asserts his views, is scathing of the Project, and demands to speak to his elusive boss (whom he later refers to, ironically, as "La Sua Leggiadra e Celtica Maestà", *SU*, 231). After numerous rebuffs and postponements, he is driven by her PA, Severino Segaluzza, to "Salzfurt" in the "*Land* del Mittelmark", where Martinelli always seems to be on business. Alberto describes Salzfurt as a place where "i poliziotti non mancano" [*SU*, 107], and where there is a street named Kramergasse: "un suono sinistramente simile a quello di 'camera a gas'" [*SU*, 108]). Here he meets Martinelli's ally, Hans Albert Mayer ("Ham", as she later calls him, *SU*, 231), governor of his *Land* and leader of the "Fronte Federale Nazionale". Mayer's declared opinions on immigration, race, castration and the death penalty place him "slightly to the right of Adolf Hitler", making him a further target for Alberto's sarcasm. When Alberto openly challenges his political stance, however, Mayer denies being racist, denies there is discrimination in his *Land* – merely a strict application of the law.[12] Characters using language (or political "correctness") to mislead or deceive in this way (Martinelli and Mayer) are a recurrent presence in Avoledo's writing,[13] as is the theme of the unlikely

[11] The *Supporta Padania Freedom Campaign e Made in Padania* site states: "Il sostantivo Padania è entrato nell'uso comune da pochi anni, ma in realtà esiste ed è utilizzato da circa un secolo". And "Noi padani siamo abituati a chiamare la nostra terra Padania e questo nome ci è ormai tanto familiare da non chiederci forse più neppure da dove deriva. Etimologicamente deriva dal celtico Pad, a sua volta ripreso dal latino Padus che indica l'antico nome del fiume Po; con cura ne han già parlato illustri padanisti proprio sui Quaderni" [etc]. See http://www.padaniacity.org/articoli.asp?ID=2126 (last accessed 17-8-2009).

[12] See *SU*, 112, 119 and 120. For his part, Mayer asks Martinelli why she has chosen to employ Alberto, with his "idee un po' divergenti"; the councillor can only blush in reply. See *SU*, 121 and 128.

[13] The narrative structure of *Lo stato dell'unione*, furthermore, underlines the novel's strong focus on the power and ambiguity of words: each chapter opens with the word or phrase that concluded the previous one, often with an altered sense or context (eg "capo", "uscita", "lampo").

"convert", or compromised personality (Alberto himself), themes to recur most forcefully in the novel *La ragazza di Vajont* (2008).[14]

Not only does Avoledo have contemporary Padania and Austria in mind here, with their extreme right-wing political parties, representatives and attitudes,[15] also extant are myriad criticisms, implicit and explicit, of present-day life and "culture". We find spoilt, tv-fed children, convenience food, game shows, and prizes for triviality: "Viviamo nell'epoca del Sistema Premiante" [*SU*, 205], Alberto muses. Through his protagonist's comments and actions, Avoledo emphasizes the increasing dangers for children in an "adult" world; he satirizes the "questionnaire culture" (and its corrupt uses); he censures corporate practices intended to keep employees from too much "idle" thinking; and he laments the irritating complexity of everyday objects. In short, he exposes all manner of assaults upon individuality which confuse or belittle, degrade or infantilize – a "bread and circuses" culture at the service of their architects' nationalistic or materialistic ends. Meetings and teams, in particular, are reviled.

> "Non sopporto il lavoro di squadra. Dev'essere un retaggio del mio periodo milanese, quando ho fatto conoscenza con il metodo che poi ero solito definire 'rito Ambrosiano': riunioni, riunioni, riunioni, progetti, progetti, progetti. Soprattutto riunioni. Riunioni per definire i progetti, progetti di riunioni, riunioni per definire le successive riunioni, progetti di progetti di riunioni...
>
> E poi *scheduling*, e *planning*, e *master plans* e *reports*...
>
> Riunioni e progetti sembravano fatti apposta per insabbiare un'idea, per mummificare e avvolgere in un bendaggio di banalità uno spunto originale. Se non era un altro 'creativo' era qualcuno dell'ufficio legale, o l'*account*, a bloccarti e a far ripassare infinite volte un'idea attraverso le Scilla e Cariddi di interminabili riunioni, al termine delle quali si stendeva un *report* da valutare nel corso di una riunione successiva.
>
> E così via" [*SU*, 107, original emphasis].

Alberto's work soon sees him imitating management, however, as he wavers between the extremes of "subversive" and "submissive". He promptly forms two subgroups: "il sottogruppo Consumatori" and "il sottogruppo Prodotto".[16] The former ("Consumatori") is responsible for carrying out a survey to solicit, or "forge", interest in the Celts. Indeed, the questions, dictated by Martinelli, produce only distorted or wholly misleading findings, as the following exchange illustrates. This is the third question Alberto puts to his half-Irish friend Neil.

> "'Ritiene che la Regione faccia abbastanza per la riscoperta e valorizzazione del nostro patrimonio culturale celtico?'
>
> 'C'è la casella TROPPO?'

[14] This novel is set in a race-purged, post-apocalyptic Italy. In 2008 the author also published *L'ultimo giorno felice*, which examines environmental issues, while 2009 saw the publication of the beguiling, futuristic novel *L'anno dei dodici inverni*.

[15] Mayer is based on an Austrian politician who, in Avoledo's words, "ha flirtato a lungo con i nostri politici regionali"; the author prefers not to elaborate further on Martinelli's real-life source (personal communication, 1-4-2009).

[16] We even see him defending the exhibition, with its falsified exhibits (eg. *SU*, 181).

'No'.

'Allora non rispondo'.

'Ma devo metterci qualcosa. Dai: o SÌ o NO'.

'Ma è la domanda che è sbagliata. Se dico di sì la mia risposta è favorevole all'iniziativa, se dico di no è ancora più favorevole'" [*SU*, 169-70].

Rabo Mishkin, a friend of Neil's (and a character first encountered in *Mare di Bering*), responds similarly, and Neil pronounces the questionnaire scheme, together with the exhibition and Alberto's working party, part of a conspiracy: "fanno parte di un disegno piú complesso. Di un *piano*" [SU, 183], original emphasis). Although Rabo then spells it out ("Chiamala come vuoi, un complotto, un piano segreto, insomma, per staccare questa Regione del resto del Paese", *SU*, 184), Alberto still prefers to defend it, to the extent that when he runs out of time conducting surveys in the Park he ends up filling in half of the questions himself.

The second group ("Prodotto") comes up with a series of ideas for the Project, which by this time has become "Il Progetto Celti, Versione 1.2" [*SU*, 240]: a comic with a character called "l'Ardito Celta"; acrostics, whose answers then form phases such as "regione libera" or "regione indipendente"; and a Cd Rom on the Celtic peoples ("dalle origini dei popoli celtici alla liberazione dell'Irlanda, all'autonomia della Scozia e ai movimenti per la libertà dei popoli dell'Italia del Nord", *SU*, 260). The final idea is a videoclip ("lo spot"), as imagined by team member Sergio, who describes it to his colleagues: opening rural views of the region accompanied by tranquil music, "Mamme che allattano. Bambini che giocano. Roba cosí". Discordant music then heralds the intrusion of unwanted elements, "l'Ombra sinistra della minaccia" leading to scenes of combat. And finally: "Una bandiera che sventola sullo sfondo, in trasparenza. La *nostra* bandiera. Bambini felici. Campi arati. Alberi in fiore. Il pilota sorride e scivola d'ala sulla terra liberata. Dissolvenza finale" [*SU*, 260-61, original emphasis]. This, of course, was precisely the kind of homely, rural idyll used in Nazi propaganda about the idealized State, as well as by proponents of the Fascist "Strapaese" movement.

Through Alberto, we then have the team's reactions, in what is a further parody of the emotive power of such images.

"Nessuno apre bocca, per un po'.

Mi schiarisco la gola. 'Sì. Bene. Interessante'.

'*Bravo*!' esclama una voce femminile.

Mi volto a destra, e vedo che sulle guance della Deodati scivolano due lacrime. Sono due lacrime che scendono parallele, quasi alla stessa altezza.

'Bravo' ripete commossa, con la voce rotta.

'Grazie'.

'Sì', mi accodo 'ma qual è il messaggio? Cosa c'entra la guerra?'

Sergio mi guarda come se avessi parlato in una lingua morta. 'Non c'è nessun *messaggio*. Sono solo immagini e musica'.

Ma vedo che anche Andrea e il geometra hanno gli occhi lustri. Sergio è felice. Balbetta, guardandosi intorno e riflettendosi nell'entusiasmo degli altri.

'Sono solo immagini'" [*SU*, 261-62, original emphases].[17]

[17] Many Padania websites, indeed, open with "interesting" images and musical effects, such as the site *Bandiere dei popoli* which greets you with Verdi's *Va' Pensiero*; see

The author's barbed irony is never far from the surface,[18] as his spirited disclaimer to the text already hinted: "Ogni riferimento a persone viventi o a fatti realmente accaduti (o a entrambe le cose) è puramente casuale. I posti e le persone di cui parlo non esistono, i Celti nemmeno, quindi siamo pari". And this leads us directly to an examination of symbolic functions, particularly of the novel's protagonist and of the Celts.

For much of the story, as an individual – husband, father, manager – Alberto disappoints. At home he betrays Marta (firstly with their Polish maid, and then with team member Aurelia), refusing, furthermore, to react to his wife's physical blows and accusations - "A questo punto potrei reagire. *Dovrei*, magari" [*SU*, 223, original emphasis]. At the office he adopts a casual attitude to his work: he appears naive, or feigns ingenuousness, and is far from being the "perfect", blameless protester – he keeps quiet, like the others, in order to be paid. When Marta angrily confronts her husband about the propagandistic leaflet Gaia has brought home, he wearily denies his own hand in it, but cannot deny it originated from his office; the leaflet announces the "giornata dell'identità celtica" for primary schoolchildren to be held on 31st October, the eve of the Celtic Samhain, and includes a questionnaire for parents - "la compilazione è obbligatoria" [*SU*, 277]. And at the grand re-opening of their exhibition at the Castle, hearing himself spouting details about the (newly) falsified findings, the lives and works of non-existent people, Alberto notes: "Mentre racconto […] con un'altra parte di me mi ascolto e inorridisco. Al tempo stesso sono affascinato dalla mia vena affabulatoria. Mi ascolto volentieri mentre racconto" [*SU*, 307].

And yet, evidence that this protagonist has been willing to take a principled stand finally emerges. Firstly, it transpires (from contact with Neil and the latter's strange "future recordings" device) that Alberto's exposure of Puritan had been more honourable than foolhardy: the Italian company (offshoot of an American corporation) was to cause the death of thousands of mothers through its post-pregnancy slimming product [*SU*, 338-41].[19] And secondly, having failed to persuade Martinelli to reveal the full significance of the Project, he bravely seeks the truth from Aurelia, who has ruthlessly framed him for murder (Sergio and his friend Ivor are discovered with their throats slit, having apparently "served their purpose"; see *SU*, 368-69). In Alberto's final encounter with Aurelia, she admits that the Samhain festival was intended to mark the beginning of independence for all the Celtic peoples [*SU*, 425], and that if Alberto had ventured to betray them, evidence would have been produced – has already been fabricated – to show his complicity in the two murders.[20]

Overall, Alberto shows both strong and weak traits: an "average" individual, he protests and opposes on a grand scale, but does not live so differently from those he criticizes in the smaller, everyday areas of life – as with the questionnaires, and the fact that he and Marta are employing their maid illegally. It is doubtless no coincidence that

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http://www.bandieredeipopoli.com/padania.htm (last accessed 18-8-2009). Extreme sentimentalism was also at the root of Nazi visions of Teutonic culture, one of the reasons why Wagner's operas were so very popular with Hitler and his immediate entourage.

[18] The team cannot even open a bottle of *spumante* properly (see *SU*, 233).

[19] Readers suspecting a straightforward plot sequence are repeatedly proved wrong – in *Lo stato dell'unione* as in much of Avoledo's narrative.

[20] Segaluzza is a further "casualty", apparently via suicide [*SU*, 412].

his name, Alberto Mendini, and initials, are reflected in those of "Ham", or (Hans) Albert Mayer, telescoped, linguistically, from the greater ("major") to the diminutive ("-ini").[21]

Alberto's advertising world, like that of Giulio (*L'elenco telefonico*), like that of Mika (*Mare di Bering*), is one that promotes vulnerability, insecurity, and all kinds of corrupt practices. Alberto does protest, but he is also a "product" of his tainted environment, sucked into the system he morally opposes. He had tried but in the end fails, not especially because it's too difficult, or because he is not intelligent enough (we clearly see that he is set up and betrayed); his failure, rather, is an indictment of the ways in which Fascism and Nazism, big business and multinationals, gain allegiance. They incite and subdue, manipulate and crush; they use violence where necessary and they absolve themselves of all personal responsibility for the effects of "innocent" words, laws, customs or practices, or "chance". During the Samhain festival, in fact, all the region's TV channels transmit programmes on the Celts, including Sergio and Ivor's video clip, while the national channels are "disturbate (ufficialmente per dei lavori al ripetitore)", as Alberto pointedly explains [*SU*, 416].

It is the Celtic presence in *Lo stato dell'unione* that provides the story with both its framework and its symbolic power. Not only does Alberto's involvement with the "progetto celtico" span the period from 1st May (the Celtic festival of "Beltane") to 1st November ("Samhain"), but the finale seems to be a re-enactment, or parody, of a Celtic or Druidic death ceremony. In the final scene, the protagonist undergoes a bizarre sex ritual in which he is brutally smothered at his moment of climax, his head suddenly encased in a plastic bag; fertility, according to Celtic beliefs, is linked with aggression, the head is sacred, and death signifies instant rebirth.[22] Indeed, despite the seemingly light tone of the opening of the story, the Celtic intrusion into Alberto's life is presented as marking as important a date in his life as was the assassination of Kennedy or the Twin Towers tragedy for the Americans [*SU*, 7]. The names of the characters are significant in this sense too. Enrica Martinelli is not only (supposedly) a cultural "enricher", but war-like, like the Celtic peoples (or the medieval Teutonic Knights), as indeed is her 'opposite' Marta. Aurelia, who stages the finale, is the golden hunter-temptress, with eyes the colour of "un campo di trifoglio irlandese" [*SU*, 206], her relationship with Alberto representing that special bond between hunter and hunted.[23] The connection between a Celtic revival in the northeast of Italy and the racial purging, furthermore, are perfectly amalgamated in the ancient Celtic symbol of the swastika.

Lo stato dell'Unione represents a calculated response to the closed, arrogant policies and fixations of politicians of the Italian right. The left-wing parties, moreover, do not escape censure, either, portrayed as feeble and riddled with compromise, and the contemporary

[21] The letters A and M are also echoed in the names of several other characters, emphasising this confusion: not only the two Albertos, but also Aurelia, Andrea, and the *assessore*; and Marta, Mendini, Mayer, Martinelli, Matteo, and Mishkin.

[22] The head further signifies ambiguity for the Celts, in all forms and functions (not unlike the Roman Janus symbol), while the "immortality of the slain" is a central part of Celtic mythology; see *Sacred Symbols: Peoples, Religions, Mysteries*, ed. R. Adkinson, London, Thames & Hudson, 2009, pp. 113, 119, 126, 137 and 148.

[23] Neil, too, has Irish roots; he acts as a sounding board for Alberto's theories and concerns, as a voice of reason against the Project and Alberto's connection with it ("Credimi, Alberto, io ne so qualcosa, di cospirazioni di Stato"; *SU*, 184), and as the archetypal "mad scientist" figure, "hearing" his voices from the future.

confusion over political "identity" and "ideology" is highlighted. Witness to the author's anxieties, however, it is the menace of the separatist mentality that overshadows the whole novel, the "state" of the (Italian) "union": "È un tema che va affrontato, e io sto cercando di farlo. Anche perché siamo una società profondamente corrotta, che non può ritenersi superiore o diversa rispetto al resto del mondo".[24]

Through his fictions Tullio Avoledo passes judgement on today's world, in contexts that embrace globalization, political and economic corruption, and threats to identity. He places idiosyncratic, yet all-too-human characters in seemingly normal situations, which, however, because of a superimposed mythical or fantastic dimension, become quite extra-ordinary. The author exposes, on the one hand, the corrupt and the (easily) corrupted, those powerful leaders, or corporations, who stop at nothing to achieve their ends – political, financial, or racial, and, on the other, individuals who are too weak, too alone, or too worn down by the "everyday", the "ingranaggio", or the immorally powerful, to oppose the system – which perpetuates that seemingly innate corruption.[25] Whilst the settings may be largely "Northern", the author's criticisms have clear relevance for much of the Western world today.

Avoledo patently writes out of the worlds of his own experience, banking and law, yet he also draws on, and discloses, his broader interests, political, social and literary. While he could be accused, in *L'elenco telefonico*, of simply unleashing his own frustrations against the world, several years on his accumulated criticisms, gentle or vehement, strike a powerful chord. Questions of morality are uppermost. Avoledo's protagonists are drawn to fight corruption, but often with corruption, to fight conspiracies, but with a counter-conspiracy. Of course it is too easy to claim that society is responsible for the parlous state of affairs, as some of his characters appear to imply (Rabo Mishkin, for example, in his original incarnation in *Mare di Bering*), or that there was little "choice" (Alberto), but the author also invites self-examination: taking responsibility as well as assigning blame.

An integral part of Avoledo's intention is undoubtedly to amuse his reader – through dialogues that sparkle and bristle, through lexical and situational humour, through irony, ambiguity, and linguistic agility, by teasing or misleading.[26] In his work Avoledo adopts the post-modern traits of pastiche, parody and cultural borrowings to warn us, to "instruct through delight" (Coleridge), as well as to emancipate us in some way from the consequences of modernity (Bauman). But in addition, I would contend, his writing is, or has become, a way of reclaiming a "necessary" thinking space for, himself, a space which, with work and family demands, is not "won" without difficulty. His is a response to the contemporary world that began by affecting a lack of concern with literary style. And despite his appearance of maintaining this nonchalance, it is plain that his style has evolved and matured. It is "tighter", more controlled, at times prosaic or descriptive, at others highly imaginative or elliptical, his narrative structures constantly varying.

Finally, Avoledo's novels are not so much concerned with the fight of the just against the unjust, as with the humanistic championing of individuality. Following

[24] Personal communication, 29-4-2008.

[25] One disconcerting, if comic "ingranaggio" in *Lo stato dell'unione* is the existence not only of the "Squadra" but of the "Gruppo"; in revealing their respective roles to Alberto, Martinelli is prompted to observe, not unkindly, "Povero il mio genio incompreso. Il mio nobile idealista" [*SU*, 395].

[26] The "misleading" aspect, a stylistic device, is surely also intended to reflect the habitual "sleight of hand" of today's wreckers – the glib politicians, bankers, and industrialists, etc.

publication of *L'elenco telefonico*, Avoledo found himself, at least initially, ostracized in his workplace; the prominent figures he has bravely targeted, here and in subsequent novels, either protest, or refuse to recognize themselves (though their symbolic identity is clear to everyone else).[27] It is likely that, following in the footsteps of eminent forbears such as Sciascia, Avoledo will go on being "uno scrittore scomodo".

[27] Avoledo made this point in his lecture *Il futuro non è più quello di una volta*, University of Salford, 27-4-2008 (Conference, *New Authors / Auteurs: Into the New Millennium*).